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POSTMEDIA

Shuffle at Veterans Affairs leaves Legion unimpressed

Fantino's demotion called 'a political
move' as O'Toole named as successor

BY JON FEKETE
OTTAWA CITIZEN

Working to mend a threadbare relationship with Canada's veterans, Prime Minister Stephen Harper demoted embattled minister Julian Fantino out of Veterans Affairs Monday and promoted rising star former Canadian Forces member Erin O'Toole to the post. The file had become a political

vulnerability for the Conservative government in recent months, due in part to missteps by the gaffe-prone Fantino. Replacing him gives the prime minister an opportunity to start over at Veterans Affairs while also bringing a fresh face into his cabinet.

It's a meteoric rise for O'Toole, a 41-year-old former lawyer and military officer first elected as an MP in late 2012. The new minister faces

enormous challenges, however, including earning back the trust of veterans fed up with the government. Some veterans' advocates, and the opposition parties, say a new minister won't change the Conservatives' message or policies, which they feel have shortchanged many former soldiers.

The ministers were sworn in to their new portfolios Monday in a small ceremony at Rideau Hall.

O'Toole, a former Canadian Forces helicopter navigator, was parliamentary secretary to the international trade minister before the shuffle, but had often been called

on to comment for the government on veterans issues.

"It's an honour for me to serve our veterans," O'Toole told reporters on the way out of Rideau Hall. "I served, myself, and they're some of our finest."

O'Toole earned his wings as the tactical co-ordinator aboard Sea King helicopters and was posted to Canadian Forces Base Shearwater in Nova Scotia. The Sea Kings are based on Canadian warships and their primary role is hunting submarines.

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